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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 VATICAN 000047

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SUBJECT: HOLY SEE: NEA DAS DANIN DISCUSSES LEBANON AND MIDDLE EAST  
WITH DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER

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CLASSIFIED BY: Christopher Sandrolini, Charge d'affaires, EXEC,  
State.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. NEA DAS Danin discussed Lebanon, Israel/Palestinians, and Holy See relations with Israel with Deputy FM Parolin on February 23. On Lebanon, Danin shared the USG analysis of the situation, and clarified USG perspective on Syria's role. Parolin emphasized the need for Christian unity, for all Lebanese to work for the common good, and implied that the US should engage Syria further. Parolin said the Holy See has been debating whether to send an envoy to Lebanon to address political issues, but had doubted that the time was right. Danin strongly encouraged such a move, and toward the end of the conversation Parolin seemed to have been at least partly won over. On Middle East issues, Danin provided an update on the NUG and Secretary Rice's recent trilateral talks, and explained the USG perspective on Hamas. Parolin, accentuating the positive in the Hamas/Fatah talks, thought Hamas should not be kept isolated. On the Holy See's bilateral relations with Israel, Parolin said the Holy See saw no political will from Israel to make progress on the Fundamental Agreement. He sought Danin's advice on the Rome Palestinian rights conference. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary Robert Danin met Monsignor Pietro Parolin, the Holy See's Under Secretary for Relations with States (i.e., Deputy Foreign Minister) on February 23 to discuss Lebanon, Israel/Palestinians, and bilateral Holy See relations with Israel. Also present were Charge d'affaires and Monsignor Franco Coppola.

Lebanon

¶3. (C) Danin called the situation in Lebanon very delicate; last summer's conflict had come as a disturbing surprise to the USG, and we are working hard to stabilize the situation. Lebanon has international support, as illustrated by the success of the Paris donor conference. The Siniora government has done well to hold on, but the sectarian nature of events is distressing. The USG does not believe Lebanon is on the verge of civil war, but Sunni/Shia tensions are up sharply and divisions in the Christian community are troubling. Danin described Patriarch Sfeir as effective, but aging and cautious; he remains a moral authority and figure of integrity across confessional lines.

¶4. (C) Parolin said the Holy See shares the US concern and was glad to hear that civil war is not imminent, as that would be disastrous. Lebanon is very important to the Holy See as a model for interreligious harmony. Unfortunately there has been no sign that the contending parties in Lebanon are ready to reach a solution. Divisions among Christians are worrisome, though there have been some good initiatives such as the

Maronite bishops' statement. Parolin said "outside forces" are destabilizing Lebanon, and asked whether the situation could be solved without talking to those outside forces.

¶ 15. (C) Danin agreed that outside forces -- specifically Syria -- were at work and linked to violent attacks on political leaders; in all but two of the last 20 or so cases, the victims have been Christians. The Christian split in Lebanon is an opportunity for others to meddle. We have been very disappointed by Aoun, someone we've known for years as a nationalist who now seems driven only by ambition. Parolin, noting that Aoun's aspirations have cost him his principles, agreed with Danin that Aoun had once been anti-Syria but has clearly changed. Citing the Pope's statements on Lebanon emphasizing the need for all to work for the common good, Parolin said this would be the only way to ensure the survival of democracy there. Christian unity is also essential to the survival of democracy in Lebanon, and to the survival of Christian communities in the Middle East.

¶ 16. (C) Danin, emphasizing the moral authority of the Pope and the Church in Lebanon, suggested that the Holy See take a higher profile there. Parolin observed that Aoun's relations with Cardinal Sfeir have been strained for a long time -- a complicating factor. Cardinal Etchegaray had gone to Lebanon last year as a goodwill envoy; for some time the Vatican has been considering whether to take another initiative to demonstrate concern about the situation, but Parolin doubted whether conditions were ripe for a more political initiative by the Holy See. Danin, however, endorsed the idea, saying that for the Holy See to send someone to Lebanon urging unity would indeed be positive. Christians have been fighting each other, and this is dangerous.

¶ 17. (C) Danin reviewed recent efforts by Amr Moussa, who has been reluctant to return. There is a need for such efforts, as the current situation is stalemated and the public mood is increasingly negative toward both sides. The USG view is that political compromise should be possible without affecting the status of the tribunal, which should proceed quickly. We leave issues such as cabinet restructuring, elections, etc. to the Lebanese but do follow the tribunal issue carefully. Parolin

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said Lebanese Christians feel the dilemma acutely -- they know the tribunal is essential for justice, but perhaps puts stability in jeopardy.

¶ 18. (C) Parolin asked about engaging Syria. Danin said Syria is very nervous about the tribunal. We don't know what the tribunal will decide; we respect its integrity. Danin elaborated on previous USG efforts to work with Syria, which have led nowhere; he concluded that we don't see utility in further engaging Syria now. The Saudis, Egyptians, Jordanians, and others are also upset with Syria, which is isolated as a result of its support for Hezbollah and links to Iran; the Arabs' shunning of Syria is a powerful message. Syria's obstructive attitude seems to be due to its appetite for influence in Lebanon, and the regime's corruption. Any solution requires a regional element.

¶ 19. (C) Parolin agreed but wondered what alternatives existed in Syria. Danin made clear that the US does not seek "regime change" in Syria, but rather "behavior change". Syria wants talks with Israel, but it is doubtful that Syria would actually negotiate in good faith. Opening such talks in the current environment would only serve to make Lebanese fearful of possible abandonment. That some Lebanese see Syria as a protector complicates matters, observed Parolin. Danin said it would be natural, and fine with the US, for a free Lebanon to maintain friendly and historic ties with Syria, but Lebanon must be independent.

¶ 10. (C) Parolin hinted that the Holy See might take a more favorable look at the idea of sending an envoy. Danin responded enthusiastically, noting that such an envoy would naturally face certain limits on what he could expect to achieve. He urged

Parolin to let the US know if we could help. The Pope's messages are strong and clear, but a visible, personal touch such as sending an envoy would have a unique strength of its own.

Israel/Palestinians

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¶11. (C) Danin described the Mecca agreement on the Palestinian NUG as having complicated the situation. The way in which a new government emerges will be very important. Palestinians tell us not to rush in; our remaining patient will strengthen Abu Mazen and put pressure on Hamas. Ismail Haniya as the Prime Minister is a serious problem. Still, we have taken a low-key approach so far. The recent Rice/Olmert/Abbas talks were challenging; Israel is very uncomfortable with the current situation, fearing Hamas will weaken previous Palestinian commitments to Israel. The situation in Gaza is chaotic and we need to do something. But the US Congress is very wary of the situation and will be reluctant to provide funds to security forces that are subordinate to a NUG.

¶12. (C) Parolin suggested that a small step forward would help, noting that Hamas had seemed to accept agreements with Israel. Danin clarified that Hamas said it would "respect" those agreements by letting Abu Mazen deal with Israel, but did not say it "accepted" them, and this is an important distinction. (Hamas has also recently said it would "never" recognize Israel.) This ambiguity is unsatisfactory for us.

¶13. (C) Parolin felt that there had in fact been some progress nonetheless. Should Hamas be so isolated? Danin framed the issue in terms of a negotiation. Hamas wants to end its isolation; we think that can be achieved but Hamas must provide commitments to the Quartet principles in return. In bazaar terms, the price must be right. It isn't even clear exactly what Hamas is -- is it more like the PLO, or more like the Muslim Brotherhood? What are its real objectives? Can it ever accept Israel?

Holy See/Israel

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¶14. (C) Parolin mentioned the Palestinian rights conference to be held in Rome in March. The Holy See is considering how to respond to an invitation to attend; what would the US recommend? Danin said the conference is not balanced and is too one-sided. Danin praised Holy See efforts over the years to strengthen its ties to Israel, something very much appreciated by the Israelis. They are proud and independent, but seek international acceptance.

¶15. (C) Parolin noted that while bilateral Holy See-Israel relations were good, there remained the difficult issue of the Fundamental Agreement. There had been recent talks in November, December, and January, and a plenary session is scheduled for March 29. So far, there has been zero progress; the Israelis show no political will to advance the process. Danin noted he had discussed the issue some months ago with Father Jaeger, a

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Holy See negotiator, and said the USG had raised the issue with Israel. He promised to look into the issue further and raise it again with Israel. Parolin appreciated the offer and said he hoped for progress at the March plenary.

¶16. (U) DAS Danin has cleared this cable.  
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